

'De-paving paradise' leads to personal growth at Aurora school



By Brock Weir

Joni Mitchell once said you don't know what you've got till it's gone, but Light of Christ Catholic Elementary School certainly did and, last week, they got out their hammers and chisels, and did something to get it back.

Over 40 members of the Light of Christ community, along with representatives from the York Catholic District School Board (YCDSB), Windfall Ecology Centre, and YorkWay Paving, gathered to de-pave their own personal paradise – the school yard – to make way for a healthier alternative; a healthier alternative for body, mind and soul.

Together, they pried up huge chunks of the asphalt and black top that has covered their playground for more than a quarter-century and, in time, over 450 square metres will be ripped up to 'green' the school yard with new trees, gardens, and permeable surfaces. 'Most of the playground at Light of Christ was covered in pavement,' says Principal Travis Macdonald. 'There was actually very little space that was not paved, so we wanted to create a space that was more natural to play on. [A greener area] encourages imaginative play for kids, and that is a big thing. It also provides space for kids to engage in the natural environment.

'By removing the black top, it will also help to decrease the temperatures out there. It will also mean shade trees. There was no shade on our school playground, so we have planted six trees as part of the program and not only will those trees help provide shade for our students, hopefully it will also attract birds and wildlife to the area.'

Currently, log benches have been added to the playground and more amenities are hoped to be added if more grant funding becomes available. As it stands, last week's de-paving project was sponsored by significant grants from RBC Canada and an in-kind donation from YorkWay.

The support of Windfall was also integral in bringing the project to fruition.

According to Andrea Fallone, Program Manager at Windfall, 'De-Pave Paradise' is an initiative of Green Communities Canada of which Windfall is a member. The mission is to remove paved surfaces to allow rain water to seep back into the ground rather than flow down into storm drains and into lakes and streams. Being able to 'green' communities like Aurora in the process is also a huge plus and schools are increasingly getting on board.

'There is a lot of interest from schools within [the YCDSB] to naturalize their school yards,' she says. 'Students get to enjoy a more natural school yard, they get to be outdoors and actively playing on mulch, or within trees and gardens, as opposed to pavement, it helps keep the schoolyard a bit cooler, and it gives us the educational opportunity to talk with them about watershed, native plants, native trees and issues.

'These are great community events and they get the whole community, whether it is the school community or the community at large, together and engaged on protecting our local streams, creeks, rivers and lakes. It is pushing an environmental message that we want to drink clean water.'

This message is not lost on the students of Light of Christ. Its Eco Team was heavily involved in spearheading the in-school de-paving program, says Mr. Macdonald, part of their ongoing efforts to 'save the environment and increase recycling.'

'When they were informed about this project, they felt it was wonderful because it falls into line with all the activities they have

been working on this year,? says Mr. Macdonald. ?There was immediate buy-in and excitement for the project and the kids were on-site and it was just wonderful to see how excited they were by it.?